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SUBJECT: ASEAN MPS HEADLINE ASSK BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

REF: 07 CHIANG MAI 165 (THAI CIVIL SOCIETY)

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

¶1. (U) Four members of the ASEAN Inter Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) called for tougher action against Burma by Thailand and other ASEAN nations at a June 19 event jointly hosted by Chiang Mai University to mark Aung San Suu Kyi's 64th birthday. Atypically for Burma events here, a large proportion of the crowd was Thai, and many Thai press turned up.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: There are very few ethnically Thai civil society groups working on Burma issues. The high turn-out at this event may, however, be a sign that Thais -- particularly younger ones -- are beginning to care more about Burma. The auditorium was packed, mostly with college student-aged individuals -- standing room only. The number of Thais in attendance at this event was proportionally much higher than in the past, when Burmese formed the bulk of attendees. Burmese accounted for the majority of the audience at an event held in 2007, just after the Saffron Revolution (Reftel). End Summary and Comment.

Burma: Is Thai Civil Society Beginning to Care?

¶3. (SBU) On June 19, Pol/Econ staff attended an event to mark Aung San Suu Kyi's 64th birthday held at Chiang Mai University. It was sponsored by the University's Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) and the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development (CESD) in conjunction with the AIPMC. Previous Burma events at Chiang Mai University have been hosted by the CDCE (Community Development and Civic Empowerment) Program, which exclusively targets Burmese for capacity building and training, and is relatively new. The RCSD and CESD on the other hand are well-established at the University. Furthermore, RCSD President and well-respected Thai professor Chayan Vaddhanaphuti opened the forum, and participated until its conclusion. To our knowledge, this is the first time Dr. Chayan has lent his name to an event specifically focused on Burma.

¶4. (U) The invitation to the event stated that its purpose was to "bridge a gap of understanding among Thai public and academic communities regarding Burmese situations and its people." (SIC) It went on to say "The issues of democracy and ethnic struggles, transborder investment and its impacts in relation to Thailand, including internally displaced people (IDP) will be highlighted in the forum." (SIC)

¶5. (U) In his opening remarks, Dr. Chayan emphasized the impact the situation in Burma has on the region, and that Thais should care about what transpires there -- right in Thailand's backyard. AIPMC President Kraisaak Choonhavan (a Thai) led off the presentations by MPs, followed by Loretta Ann P. Rosales from the Philippines, M. Kulasegaran of Malaysia, and Singaporean MP Charles Chong.

MP's: ASEAN Must Do More

¶6. (U) Former Senator and current Democrat Party List MP Kraisaak, who has a long history of anti-SPDC rhetoric, told the 150-strong crowd, which was made up mostly of Thais, that Burma was ASEAN's "worst problem." If Burma continued to ignore ASEAN statements calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, ASEAN would have to reconsider Burma's membership, he said. He pointed to the doubling in the number of political prisoners since 2007 and the fact that most Burmese have not even seen the text of the 2007 constitution as evidence of the Burmese regime's on-going human rights violations.

¶7. (U) Kraisaak also pointed out the applicability of the ASEAN Charter to the situation in Burma, particularly sections one and two dealing with land, habitat, human security and public health. Kraisaak claimed that Burma's failure to comply with the Charter is what prompted Thai PM Abhisit to "condemn" the situation there and call for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. Thais, he said, should be "embarrassed" by the situation in Burma, pointing to the Burmese IDPs driven into Thailand by fighting on the border and by the planned construction of dams and gas pipelines in Burma funded by UNOCAL (now Chevron). (Note: The dams, if built, will provide electricity to Thailand, even though severe power shortages still persist in Burma.)

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¶8. (U) Kraisaak also stated that the international community should make use of judicial bodies like the International Criminal Court to act against Burmese Senior General Than Shwe. The important thing, he opined, is that the international community consider Than Shwe a war criminal like Sudanese President Bashir.

¶9. (U) Filipino MP Loretta Rosales focused her remarks on the role of educational institutions in raising awareness of Burma. She spoke passionately of an upcoming appearance she would make at the University of the Philippines in Manila, emphasizing that she would convey the important contributions Thai students were making in this regard based on her experience in Chiang Mai.

¶10. (U) Kulasegaran discussed his role in forming a caucus of Malaysian MPs on Burma, and pressuring the GOM to take a more proactive stance. He also criticized the GOM's investments in Burma saying, "It's all about dollars and cents at the end of the day for governments such as Malaysia ,who invest with a military that uses the money to repress and harm its leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi and its citizens and not help them at all." ASEAN, he said, needed to introduce sanctions against Burma or suspend it; ASEAN's only success so far has been convincing Burma not to assume the chairmanship in 2004.

¶11. (U) Singaporean MP Charles Chong recapped the history of Burma's relations with ASEAN, noting that ASEAN allowed Burma to join in 1997 with the expectation that Burma's membership would give ASEAN a measure of influence over the situation there. However, both ASEAN's constructive engagement and western sanctions have failed, he argued. While asserting that the UN Security Council was the only mechanism that could effectively bring change to Burma, Chong demonstrated an understanding of the difficulties involved, pointing to the vetoes cast by Russia and China when the Council voted on a resolution in 2007.

¶12. (SBU) A Burmese journalist in exile also addressed the gathering, asserting that the Burmese regime divides the world into two groups - enemies and friends. The generals, he said, see the Burmese people as subjects of their "empire." Anyone who opposes their will is viewed by the generals as an enemy, he argued. Right now, democracy and federalism are the regime's two enemies, he asserted, making any supporter of these concepts an enemy by association. He argued that Aung San Suu Kyi represents democracy, and the ethnic groups represent federalism, which is why both are still oppressed.

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